

HOOKEDNOW

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WELCOME to the April-May issue of *HookedNow*.

Feel free to contact us if you have any questions or comments at: sweltsa@frontier.com
(include "HookedNow" in the subject line for quicker replies).

In this issue we explore spring fishing! When spring arrives depends on where you live, but whenever it arrives, spring brings new life to animals and plants across the landscape. In streams and lakes spring brings a wide range of conditions and activity, from high water to exceptional hatches. Knowing how to handle spring conditions will help you start the season right. We hope you get off to a great fishing season and find this spring your most enjoyable yet.

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Photo by Rick Hafele



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HUGHES-MORRIS-HAFELE

SKIP MORRIS - RODS & FLIES & THE REST FOR SPRING

(All photos by Skip Morris except where noted)

Photo by Carol Ann Morris



A trout river in spring is an iffy proposition, with exceptions. The standard exception is the “spring creek,” a stream rising from water that settled deep into the earth over enough years to have forgotten the whims of its seasons--a spring creek emerges from the ground at one volume and one temperature year round. A “tail-water,” a river emerging from a dam, is another exception when it’s held down to a comfortable level during wet months by some kindly agency or another. Of course there’s always the chance of a low-water year on a “freestone” river, a river neither stalled by dams nor fed by springs but gathering its flow straight off the surface, a year when runoff and rain are light and the river holds its shape from March through May and June--good for spring fishing, but a price may be paid later when the water is low and warm and the trout are stressed.

Most rivers of modest volume or smaller are freestone rivers, and most years most of them are swollen in spring with rain and melting snow. Which is why I mentioned that iffy proposition--your favorite stream may be running a good temperature for trout in early April and may even be sprinkled with hatching caddisflies or mayflies or both or more, but it may also be brown and up churning through bank-side trees and brush. If the water’s that high, you probably ought to find a spring creek or a tail-water river in good shape, or try lake fishing, and leave your favorite stream and its trout to settle down.

Photo by Carol Ann Morris



A river in high water may offer good fishing--provided it's not too high--but it won't be anything like the fishing on that river at moderate or low flows.

But your favorite trout stream may be fishable in spring. High water is okay for the fly fisher so long as it's not extreme. I've caught a lot of trout in water still tinted from near-flooding and still tugging at the brush that lines its banks. Trout have to eat, high water or not. And if they're eating you have a shot at them.

CLOTHING

March and April are particularly uncertain months for weather in much of North America, so a good place to start with springtime fishing on trout rivers is clothing and waders. Layers of clothing are always a good idea when fishing, and make especially good sense in spring, when an icy morning may build to shirtsleeve temperatures by afternoon. Two or even three fairly light shirts under a heavier one and perhaps a coat over it all provide a lot of range. If a day warms, just run back and drop off a shirt or two in the car or stuff what you take off into a small pack or the back of your fishing vest.



Spring fishing can bring warm sunshine or snow, or even both on the same day.

Pants can be layered too. Perhaps a pair of sweat pants or fleece pants over or under light pants of quick-drying material.

A waterproof jacket is a requirement if there's any chance of rain--a soaking in chilly spring is misery and could catch you a cold or make you hypothermic.

Waders are wise even if you plan not to wade (some rivers really don't require wading)--they keep you dry in

a downpour and provide considerable warmth.

A hat for UV protection and perhaps warmth, fingerless gloves to keep the chill off the hands, heavy socks (and a spare pair in case your waders leak), and you're set.

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WADING--GO WITH CAUTION, AND A FRIEND

A fishing partner makes particular sense when you'll spend the day wading a high, angry river--having someone to occasionally check with you is good insurance.

You probably already know how to wade, so I'll just say, Wade with caution. Don't push your limits, back off whenever your instincts tell you to--this is not that same easy river you cross with ease in August. High rivers run quick and strong. And if you ever use a wading staff (I always do), use one on rivers in high water.

RODS AND LINES

I've always had a soft spot for six-weight lines and rods. No matter what I need to do on a trout river--drop a size 20 midge emerger just up from the nose of a trout picking at the water's surface or heave a big weighted nymph and an indicator and some split shot way out there--a six-weight set-up seems to help me do it. And if the river's of good size, I want that rod to carry

some power. (Remember: many rivers that run light in summer and require only easy casts may run heavy in spring and demand long casts from awkward places. I fished an Idaho creek last May I couldn't have crossed if a free bamboo rod waited on the other side, then returned to it in August to cross it without going over my calves or slowing the tempo of my gait. Caught trout both times, by the way.)

Some fly fishers feel a six-weight line is too heavy, even unsporting, on a trout stream and they have every right to their opinions. Some even think a five-weight line is too much. Fine. I just want to be there to see them toss the kind of weight a high river requires for springtime nymph fishing on a feathery four-weight line. I'm not saying they can't do it, I'm just saying I want to watch. Should be entertaining.

Photo by Rick Hafele



Rod and line choice is always personal, and the author's personal choice for rivers in spring is a six-weight combination.

FLIES

On to a subject as dear to my heart as any: flies. Fly patterns for brimming springtime rivers run the gamut--I've seen trout well away from the force of a high April river sipping tiny midges in an eddy, and requiring tiny emerger flies on light tippets; but I've many times fished big gaudy nymphs and streamers in such rivers. So it's more useful to look at generalities when it comes to spring flies for rivers than to sift through the endless variations of conditions, water types, hatches, and the rest.

Perhaps the first thing you need to know about fly selection for trout rivers in spring is that the pressure's off. With the trout having just faced a winter of distractions--mainly survival, with feed scarce and the dangers of flooding and ice coming in steady waves--those fish are as close to gullible as you're likely to ever find them (with the exception of spawning, a time when trout are reckless and weak and should be left alone). So, hungry and retaining only a dim memory of their usual caution, the trout may not much care what fly you give them, and in a high flow may not much care *how* you give it to them. Easy trout can be refreshing if you're used to walking that tightrope of selecting just the right fly of just the right size and delivering it with stealth and gentle accuracy. So loosen up. Tie on some big weird dry fly, maybe one of those crazy variations of the Chernobyl Ant or a gaudy nymph--might be *deadly*.

If you plan to nymph a high river--which is a promising choice--a trailer rig is a good way to start. A trailer rig is one nymph tied to the tippet and a second nymph on a foot or so of tippet that's tied to the bend of the first nymph's hook. At least one of the nymphs in the rig is normally big and heavy, with plenty of thick lead wire (better yet, lead-*substitute* wire) at its core, and maybe a big metal bead for a head. Because such big stoneflies as the western Golden Stonefly and eastern Giant Black Stonefly are normally

Photo by Rick Hafele



Trout in spring are probably as open-minded as they'll ever be--why not show them an odd attractor nymph or a fish-egg fly?

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down there as nymphs nearly full-grown for their late-spring and summer hatching, a stonefly-nymph imitation is a good choice for the big nymph in your rig. Perhaps a Bitch Creek or Kaufmann Stone.

For the trailer nymph I tend to think of an attractor such as my Gabriel's Trumpet, or an imitation of a mayfly nymph such as the old reliable Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear which a trout might take as an immature stonefly, either one in size 12 or 14, maybe 16.

But the trailer nymph can be as big and heavy as the fly higher up the rig, and because of the extra weight another big nymph can add, perhaps it should be. So you might have a convincing Beadhead Morristone as one nymph and a silly Beadhead Yuk Bug as the other. Why not?

Streamers in spring? A natural. Expect to work them near the banks on sink-tip lines. A small-trout or sculpin imitation such as a Woolhead Sculpin should do it. If other little fishes are present in your rivers, imitations of them make perfect sense. But remember: the trout may be more open-minded than you'll find them later in the season. So why not a silly attractor streamer, maybe a Spruce fly, with a bead, some Flashabou in the body, even a wire rib for a little more shine and to increase toughness? You won't find such a fly in a fly shop or catalog, but you'll probably find the old standard Spruce and it remains a killer.



Photo by Carol Ann Morris

Expect to find rising trout, if any are rising, in softer flows off the main current in brimming springtime rivers.

Dry flies? If the water retains some clarity and there are places a trout can take something off the surface without struggling against a torrent, you bet. It may surprise you, in fact, just how high and angry a river can be and still offer dry-fly fishing. I remember a high-water day on a float trip down Montana's Bitterroot River a few years ago when we threw large dries from morning until we hit the boat landing in late afternoon. After a blast of heavy rain during our last hour of the drift, the river seemed to rise before us as our friend headed upstream to pick up his

truck and trailer. I waded out along the edge of the flow and started tossing a gaudy Chernobyl Ant variation around the flooded brush that acted like a baffle against the

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current. I had time to move only one fish, but it was a dandy: around sixteen inches of healthy cutthroat trout, a great splash of crimson along each cheek and flank. The handsomest trout of the day. He seemed to rise with perfect contentment not over riverbed but over grassy flooded bank.

High water doesn't preclude insect hatches. If some eddy or soft current off the rushing main flow is speckled with hatching Western March Brown mayflies, fine; show those trout rising to them a tan-bodied Thorax Dun or Brooks's Sprout.

As I said, trout-river fishing varies in spring. It can be like summer fishing with the river in fine condition and warm sunshine on your back. Or it can be cruel, the river churning color and the fishing a struggle. But if spring fishing can be done, it's probably worth doing, especially after winter's long stretch of limited fishing opportunities.

Photo by Carol Ann Morris



PATTERNS

BEADHEAD MORRISTONE, GOLDEN STONE

Skip Morris



Hook: Standard to heavy wire, 2X, 3X, or 4X long, slow curve optional, sizes 10 to 4.

Bead: Brown, copper, black, or gold, metal.

Thread: Brown 6/0, or 3/0. **Weight:** Lead-substitute wire. I like to wind a layer of thick wire over the center two thirds of the shank, bind that wire, and then wind a short length of thinner wire over the thorax area and bind it.

Tail: A "V" cut from the tip of a mottled-brown hen-saddle (hen-back) hackle. Trim the base of the tip and bind the tip by the trimmed base.

Rib: Medium-thick copper wire or slim gold or amber V-Rib, or the like.

Body: Brown fuzzy Antron or wool yarn—fly shops often carry these, but if not, you'll find lots of choices in yarn shops. An option: chenille.

Wing case: Two sections of pheasant-tail fibers, one bound atop the other, light side down.

Legs: The body of the hen-saddle hackle used for the tail. Stroke most of the fibers back from the cut stem and bind the tip of the stem and the remaining fibers. After the yarn is wound and ribbed, pull the feather forward (snip four slots to make three legs per side if you want), and pull the wing-case fibers forward over the top and bind them.

As an imitation of the Golden Stone nymph, the Morrystone, Golden has never failed me. The soft tail and legs move freely and convincingly in current. You can find tying instructions for tying the Morrystone in both *Fly Tying Made Clear and Simple* and *Trout Flies for Rivers*.

THORAX DUN, WESTERN MARCH BROWN

Vince Marinaro



Hook: Light wire, standard length or 1X long, sizes 16 to 10.

Thread: Tan 8/0.

Tail: Dark-tinger hackle fibers, split.

Abdomen: Tan buoyant dubbing.

Wing: Almost anything of a somber color--tan poly yarn or Antron yarn or calf tail as a single post, split breast or flank feather-tips such as turkey flats, mallard-dyed-wood-duck...

Hackle: Dark ginger, one, spiraled over the front half of the shank and trimmed underneath.

Thorax: The same dubbing used for the abdomen.

Comments: This Thorax Dun--the one that's been popular for the past couple of decades at least--is actually very different from Marinaro's original. But it became popular for the obvious reasons.

JAZZED UP, BEAD HEAD, SPRUCE FLY



Hook: Standard to heavy wire, 2X or 3X long, sizes 12 to 4.

Bead: Gold, metal.

Thread: Black or red 8/0, 6/0, or 3/0.

Tail: Peacock sword.

Rib: Gold or amber copper wire up the entire body.

Body: Rear half: red Flashabou or Krystal Flash. Front half, peacock herl.

Wing: Two badger hen-neck or large rooster-saddle hackles curving apart.

Hackle: Badger, same kind of hackle used for the wings.

DAVE HUGHES – SPRING TACTICS

(All photos by Dave Hughes except where noted)



Photo by Rick Hafele

Spring tactics depend entirely on the spring situation, and you've noticed as well as I have that conditions vary across as wide a range in spring as in all the other seasons added together. You've got to be prepared to fish anything from a tiny midge or BWO mayfly hatch on smooth water, to nymphs and streamers deep in water that is blown out. Rather than describe tactics specific to each condition, I'll give some examples of problems and solutions in my own fishing from recent springs.

The most dramatic came on a scheduled float of the Deschutes River with Curt Marr. He has a tighter calendar than mine. When he plans a trip, he's reluctant to miss it. Rain piled up in the days before our dates; reservoirs got full; water was released. The day we were to leave levels were at 9500 cfs, twice what they ought to be for the best Deschutes fishing. I called Curt to see if he might not want to cancel.

He said, "Let's go. At least we'll have a float."

We had a float. When we put his raft in at Trout Creek, the water was at the promised height, and approached the color of skim milk...not quite that white, but more chalky than clear. Things looked pretty hopeless for entertaining any trout.

Late in the afternoon of the first day on the river, Curt said, "Since we aren't going to catch any trout, how about showing me how you would rig to fish nymphs in these kinds of conditions." I was reluctant, but I did. I rigged a ten-foot leader with a big bubble indicator up top, six or eight feet of leader down to a couple of heavy split shot, a big salmon fly nymph ten inches below the shot, and a size 16 Lightning Bug on point eight inches from the larger nymph. We parked the boat in a backchannel behind an island where the current was a bit broken, and not nearly as deep as the main current I would fish in normal conditions...had I gotten into that water I'd have instantly been swept away.

I made some demonstration casts, lobbing them far upstream to give the heavy outfit plenty of time to sink, then mending and tending the line to keep the indicator floating freely, just as you'd do in more reasonable water. I got the bugs worked out of the presentation; the bobber bounced along, hesitating once in awhile to let me know the shot

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nicked the bottom now and then. Things were going smoothly, in terms of showing Curt what I'd do if I had any hope of catching trout. Of course it was not long before I hung up, and prepared to make the part in the demonstration about losing everything and having to re-rig every few minutes. When I tugged at the snag in hopes of freeing whatever had got lodged, whatever it was tugged back, then suddenly shot downstream.

You know the rest of the story. It turned out the trout had done the same thing Curt and I did: found a soft spot in the current, on the backside of an island, to idle away their time until the water

became more reasonable out where they'd rather be. That first animated snag turned out to be the most aggressive trout in a pod of them. We were able to educate half a dozen about the perils of bottom-bounced nymphs before fishing dried up there, and we trotted off downstream.



Curt Marr fishing the kind of water that forms fine trout lies when the water on the Deschutes is twice too high, and trout move into places where the current is broken, in this case by a stump that would not even be in the water when the water is at normal height. He took half a dozen nice trout on nymphs from this line of lies.



Curt Marr fishing the sort of spot that would not even be a spot when the water is at normal elevation. The slight back-eddy to which he is casting gave trout shelter from the surge of high flows, and he caught a couple of trout in water that would not often even be water.

It was a three-day float. We camped, suffered heavy rain, didn't get to see the water subside even an inch, clear up even a bit, but were able to find three or four isolated pods of trout each day. We took several trout from each pod before moving on. It became far more of a challenge to read the water right, and find the trout, than it did to rig right, and catch the trout. They were in the kinds of places that wouldn't be places when the water was normal. Every one of these holding areas was defined by

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something that broke the current, whether it was the point of an island deflecting it outward, the bouldered bottom of a riffle causing hidden soft spots, or the root wad of a tree that would in normal circumstances have been safely up on shore. Wherever the current hesitated, we found a few trout.

A perfect description of the most common holding lies, in that high water, would be the kinds of side riffles that would normally be just a foot deep, too shallow to hold trout, and that you'd pass by on a normal float. Perhaps you've noticed those tiny rippled spots, always on the inside bends in the river, and like me, you've likely tried fishing a few of them in your past, and always found them fishless. They always look good, but trout are usually busy holding in water that offers them more protection from osprey and otter...and us. But when the water is high and off-color, trout don't need that protection. What they need is shelter from the brisk currents. They find it in all those spots that would not be spots if the water was lower.



Curt Marr fishing the inside edge of an island on the Deschutes River, where trout had tucked themselves in to avoid the high and heavy current.



It seems that trout in high and cloudy water would be tucked into sheltered lies and not feeding, but this throat-pump sample is evidence that trout on the Deschutes River find lots of large groceries dislodged and available in high water.



It's good to arm yourself with a couple of nymphs when the water is high and off-color. An imitation of the salmon fly nymph, in this case Charlie Brooks's Montana Stone, will help get you down to the bottom.

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Jim Schollmeyer and I stopped at the Owyhee River in Oregon last spring on our way to the Bighorn in Montana. The water was a bit high, and slightly off-color, when we got there. A constant supply of rain while we were there did not serve to cause the water to drop and clear, which is what we wanted it to do. We hoped to fish hatches of midges and BWOs, with those big browns, for which the river is so famous, tipping up to sip them. We got none of that.

But we were able to get fair fishing simply by rigging with floating lines, six- to eight-foot leaders, and streamers with some lead in their bellies.

The water was extremely difficult to read because the river's flows are tamed by the dam upstream, and when it's opaque, you can't see into it to reveal the contours of its bottom. A shallow flat doesn't look much different from a submerged riffle; the current levels them both out. Boulder-garden runs stood out, because you could see where the landscape alongside some runs tumbled boulders right into them, and you could also see the few



Jim Schollmeyer on Oregon's Owyhee River, fishing streamers to lies that are invisible in the high and slightly cloudy water, and that therefore must be found with your flies.

boulders that protruded, and slight boils sent up by others that were too deep to stick out. These places held trout, and we were able to take a few from them, but they were also leg-breakers, because it was impossible to see where to wade safely.

Most of our fishing was done by simply exploring with big streamers. We'd insert ourselves at the head of a long run of what looked like promising water, then cast long against the far bank, let those streamers sink, retrieve them back in fits and starts. Our project was to



Woolly Buggers in black, olive and brown are often the gold standard for trout holding in heavy and off-color water, but they need to have some weight on their shanks to get down to the levels where big trout hold.

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swim them through the places where the water dropped off, became suddenly deep, formed invisible lies for nice trout. It was reading water for soft spots, the same as Curt and I had done it on the Deschutes, only we didn't read the water with our eyes; we read it with our streamers. They found the deep spots for us. In turn, the deep spots provided a few trout for us.

It was interesting fishing until a monstrous thunderstorm blew us off the river. Rain landed in buckets, scathed the landscape, tumbled rocks off the steep hillsides, sent even ducks looking for shelter and quacking in protest. It soured our attitude, and ended our fishing. We didn't stick around to see if the water came up and went even further off-color. We got out of there, and it's likely that you came about the time we left, arrived in sunshine, got to fish water that became low and clear, were able to present your dry flies to trout rising to sip those midges and BWOs.



Jim Schollmeyer with a nice Owyhee brown trout that fell for a streamer fished deep on a slow swing.

Our destination was the Bighorn River, where we set up Jim's trailer at Cottonwood Camp. The weather there was closer to bitter, on the trailing edge of winter rather than the leading edge of spring. The water was normal, neither high nor off-color. But it was cold, and the hatches we hoped to fish hadn't started yet. We floated every day anyway, and got into small pods of trout rising sporadically to scant numbers of a variety of things that trickled off: olives, midge pupae, scattered early brown stones, various things the trout tipped up to take but that we were never able to collect and observe. It was slow fishing.

I decided to practice some wet fly swinging techniques I'd learned from Davy Wotton, the wet-fly guru, while fishing with him on the White River in Arkansas. I'd bought an eleven-foot rod and supple floating line in order to outfit for his high-rod method. Because rises were so sprinkled that I didn't feel compelled to cast over them, I sat in the grass at the edge of the river, next to Jim's boat, and patiently strung that long rod, fixed a 9-foot 5X leader, tied a Pheasant Tail Flashback to the tip, added three feet

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more of 5X, tied a Tungsten Bead Pheasant Tail to it as the point. The great Davy would have rigged with three wet flies in a variety of sizes, sink rates and colors, but I reckoned the trout must be seeing and taking at least a few of BWO nymphs, and wanted to imitate them for my own pleasure if not theirs.

It turned out the trout were quite pleased by this setup. I waded into a broad riffle that faded out into an even broader run, the kind the Bighorn features, and that can take an hour or two to fish if trout are at all active. They were, in far greater numbers than showed on the surface. Just a few of them rose, on very sparing occasions, the length of that entire stretch of water. I didn't bother rushing to them, casting over them. Instead, I entered at the head of the riffle, then worked my way downstream

Photo by Jim Schollmeyer



The author high-sticking a couple of Pheasant Tail nymphs on the swing with a long rod, early in the BWO hatch on the Bighorn River in Montana.



Various versions of the famous Pheasant Tail nymph that can be fished on the swing when the BWO hatch is about to begin. Be sure to kick around in the currents and collect a few naturals, make sure your fly is at least approximately the same size.

as patiently as I would had I been covering it for summer steelhead or Atlantic salmon. I worked out a long line. The slow rod, with its construction of wide, open loops, didn't cause me any troubles, in the form of tangles.

When that brace of Pheasant Tails landed, always cutting across the currents at just a slight angle downstream, I'd give them a few feet to sink. Then I would make upstream mends to slow them, to swim them, I hoped, as patiently as BWO mayfly nymphs might rise from the bottom in that water that bordered on frigid.

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Trout didn't hit with any thuds. Instead, they would intercept the nymphs gently, tug at them with great hesitation, or tap-tap them as you would expect from a steelhead. It was counterproductive to set the hook quickly, even with that long rod that softened any set. Instead, it was best to simply hold on, let the trout hook themselves, not respond at all until they were on and knew it and were angry at that sting, running away from it. The best way to make it all work was exactly the way Davy Wotton taught me on the White River: loft the rod tip high, let the line drop in a constant curve from the rod top to the water, watch that curve, set the hook only when the line began to rise higher in the air, indicating a take, or the point where it entered the water hesitated, even moved off a bit upstream or straight away. Then a trout was on, and setting the hook would cause it to dance.



Great guide Matt Granberg demonstrates the high rod and curved line technique that can be highly effective when trout feed on scattered nymphs active in cold spring currents in the hours, and even days, before the heavy hatch begins.

This method--swinging nymphs and even wet flies that represented the hatches that were trickling off--worked well for about three days. Then the weather warmed, the BWO hatch started to come off in more normal abundance, trout turned their attention to floating duns, and my swung nymph tactic no longer interested them. That's all right. My interest turns away from sunk flies when trout begin rising in sufficient numbers that they can be pinpointed, cast to with dry flies and some hope of success.

That's another and more major spring tactic: fishing dry flies and emergers over rising trout. You know how to do it better than I do, though, so I'm not going to bother you about that. I've just given you some hints about what to do when what you'd really like to do isn't working very well in the spring conditions of the moment.

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Dave's book *Essential Trout Flies* will not just get you started selecting the few flies you need to get started fishing for trout, it will list the full bunch of them you might ever need as you get far along in the sport. Includes steps in tying them.



A pretty Bighorn River rainbow trout that got fooled by a BWO nymph imitation fished on the slow swing just prior to the heaviest part of the hatch.

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RICK HAFELE - MY FAVORITE SPRING BUGS

(All photos by Rick Hafele except where noted)

Photo by Dave Hughes



When exactly spring starts can be tricky to say. Of course the calendar does give us an exact time: This year the vernal equinox (start of spring) was at 7:02am on March 20th. However, you might have a different opinion about the start of spring if you happen to live in the part of the country hit with the big snowstorm after March 20th. I find it's safer to go by all the signals we get from nature, like when trilliums burst out on the forest floor, or when crocuses pop up in gardens and yards, and when trees sprout bright green new leaves, not to mention all the activity by the birds and the bees. Nature also tells us when spring has arrived on streams and lakes. In fact for fly fishers spring provides a lot more to look forward to than just fresh flowers in the garden. The first hatches of the year can be

some of the best of the year, and that's what I want to discuss here - my favorite spring hatches. Most of these are well known to fly fishers, and they reflect where I live, the Pacific Northwest. Each part of the country has its own spring hatches, which can even vary between neighboring streams or lakes if water conditions differ. The important thing is to know what the spring hatches are in your area and what factors affect their timing.

March Browns

First on my list is the Western March Brown, a.k.a. *Rhithrogena morrisoni*. *R. morrisoni* is a clinger mayfly widely distributed throughout the West. There are mayflies that hatch earlier than *R. morrisoni*, namely species of *Baetis* or blue-winged olives, but when it comes to signals of spring *R. morrisoni* seems to trigger that "winter is finally over" feeling. The start of this hatch, like any hatch, is weather dependent. Its name clearly suggests March is the month you'll find it, and in many years that's exactly the case. When winter weather lingers well into March, however, the hatch becomes much more the Western April Brown, and in some very mild winters it would best be called the Western February Brown. In most years, though, you will find mid-March to mid-April the period when Western March Browns grace many western streams with a good dose of dry fly fishing.

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Western March Browns begin emerging before the cottonwoods have leafed out on the Willamette River in Oregon.

If you live in the midwestern or eastern part of the country you will still find March Browns, but they will be the American March Brown, or *Stenonema vicarium*, rather than *R. morrisoni*. *S. vicarium* also belongs to the clinger group of mayflies, and just as spring often comes later to the midwest and eastern region of the country, *S. vicarium* hatches typically run from mid-May to late June.

As clingers March brown nymphs are lovers of medium to fast water where the bottom is composed of softball to bowling ball sized rocks. You can get a

good idea of how soon the hatch may start by collecting some nymphs off the rocks and looking closely at their wingpads. If wingpads are dark brown to almost black, then the hatch is eminent. If you don't see any nymphs with dark wingpads you can safely assume you have another couple weeks to wait before duns will start popping out on the surface.

When you find some mature nymphs, but the hatch has yet to start, it can be a great time to fish nymph imitations. Once the hatch has started, fishing nymph patterns is still effective prior to the actual start of dun emergence. This is a mid-day hatch, typically 1:00 to 3:00, depending on the specific weather on the day you're fishing - warmer days mean earlier emergence by an hour or two and colder days a later emergence



Try nymphing in choppy riffles from mid-morning to early afternoon, before the duns start appearing later in the day.

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by an hour or so. Also cloudy, even slightly wet, days will almost always produce better hatch activity than clear sunny days.

For fishing nymphs I go with a very standard approach: a weighted nymph, a split shot on the leader 8 to 10 inches up from the fly, and a strike indicator located about twice the depth of the water from the fly. Don't be tempted to use a bigger nymph pattern than the naturals, as you will catch more fish with a nymph pattern of the proper size. Sometimes this seems counterintuitive as the larger fly would seem to be easier for fish to see, especially if spring streamflows are up and slightly off color, but trout seem to have exceptional vision and are often picky eaters, even for nymphs. For all my fishing I find size more important than color when it comes to catching selective trout.



Photo by Dave Hughes



A Rhithrogena morrisoni nymph and its imitation. I worry less about color and more about size when picking a pattern for either nymphs or duns.

Of course when you're looking forward to fishing a good hatch, fishing nymphs is not your primary goal. Once a few duns start popping up on the surface I like to put on a dry fly with a dropper trailing off the bend of the dry fly's hook for 18 - 20 inches where I knot on a nymph pattern. This way you can see if the fish are more interested in the nymphs rising to the surface or the duns floating on top. If fish are rising but ignoring your dry fly, then it's time to put on an emerger pattern. One I've used frequently for March Browns is a soft-hackled pattern or March Brown flymph. Mr. Hughes, a.k.a. Dave Hughes, has referred to this pattern in previous Hookednow issues and has written about it in several of his books. Fish it dead drift right over rising trout, and if you get no takers let it swing in the current at the tale-end of the drift. When fishing dries pay attention to drag. The trout may be hungry and eager in the spring, but they still get turned off by a dragging dry fly.

Photo by Dave Hughes



The March Brown dun above is just one stage you'll need to match during a hatch. It's good to have a selection of fly patterns that cover all stages: nymphs, emergers, duns, and spinners.

Bottom: Peacock Herl Nymph; MB Nymph
Middle: CDC Parachute emerger; MB Flymph
Top: Harrop Dun; Rusty Spinner



Saddle-case Caddis

I consider the saddle-case caddis, or *Glossosoma*, one of the top spring hatches anywhere in the country, but one that many fly fishers never see. The genus *Glossosoma* includes about 22 species spread across North America in which several specific species dominate in different regions. But species identification, besides being nearly impossible, is of no concern to the fish or the angler. The important thing is to be aware of this little caddis and be ready to imitate it when it's available to trout.

Glossosoma larvae live in small domed shaped cases roughly the size of your little finger nail. Hidden inside these small domes of gravel they easily go unnoticed. Once you know what to look for though, you will find their little domes on almost any cobble sized piece of rock you pick up in quick



A typical cluster of *Glossosoma* larva cases on a submerged rock.

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choppy waters. *Glossosoma* larvae have a strong preference for cool mountain streams, but some species are well adapted to warmer valley rivers as well. As a result there are very few trout streams in North America I have fished where I didn't see this little caddis when I looked for them.

Most trout streams have more than one species of *Glossosoma* present, and their hatch periods often overlap. As a result it's not uncommon to see *Glossosoma* activity from as early as mid-February to as late as mid-November with periods of intense activity interspersed with low activity. Spring is a period of intense activity. In the West, I first start looking for adult activity in late February and March, but often that's a bit too early. By April and May however, I'm almost sure to see lots of adults crawling around on streamside grasses and shrubs, a sure sign that hatch activity is in full swing.

Because of their size (18's to 20's), many people give them little importance. But like most small insects what they lack in size they make up for in numbers, and when



The small adults of Glossosoma are easiest to spot running around on streamside vegetation. Just because they are small don't ignore them when abundant.

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Photo by Mark Bachmann



*Glossosoma emerge from riffles and runs with a cobble substrate.
Pupa patterns are a good first choice.*

large numbers of insects get active trout take notice. The first thing I try when I see good numbers of adults on bank-side vegetation is fishing a pupa pattern in the choppy riffle water where they live. It's difficult to know exactly when during the day the pupae are leaving their underwater shelters and swimming to the surface, but in general it tends to be between mid-morning and mid-afternoon. On a couple of

occasions during a heavy hatch, I've had dozens of pupae crawling up my waders while standing in a riffle fishing - a very good sign that you should tie on a pupa pattern. The pupae swim like Michael Phelps, and once they hit the water's surface many species dart toward protruding rocks along the shore to crawl up on for emergence, while other species may emerge in open water. In either case pupa patterns work.

Start by fishing your pupa close to the bottom. A typical nymph-rig setup is one way to get these small flies down close to the streambed. Once your fly nears the end of your drift, however, let it swing up to the surface. You can impart some twitches during the rise as well. The rising action will often invoke a quick strike, just be careful not to strike back too hard or you will quickly break off a nice trout. If you see some fish feeding activity you can take off the indicator and some weight (I still like to leave a small split shot on the leader ten inches or so above the pupa pattern) and use an up-and-across presentation. Let your fly sink a bit then give it some twitches and a lifting motion with your rod tip. Again don't strike hard when a fish takes.

Adult female *Glossosoma* are also amazing little swimmers that actually dive underwater and swim to the stream bottom where they deposit their eggs. Once their eggs are laid they let go and head back to the surface, all the while enclosed in a shimmering bubble of air. Use a small adult diving caddis pattern to match these submerged females. I use a very simple fly with just a dubbed body and CDC wing. Start by twitching the dries

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across the surface, and if this fails sink them underwater with a small split shot and fish them with up-and-across presentations similar to fishing the pupae.

Because these little caddis are so abundant and hatch over extended periods of time, keep looking for them throughout the year. Besides spring I have seen good hatches in July and October through November.



Useful patterns for Glossosoma include larva (left), pupa (middle), and adult (right). Size is once again of prime importance when trout are feeding selectively on the naturals.

The Brown Willow Fly

An early spring stonefly hatch can be a wonderful thing, and thankfully the brown willow fly comes along at just the right time. Brown willow fly is the common name for *Skwala americana*. Fly fishers now often refer to this hatch as simply the Skwala hatch. This is a western species found throughout the Rockies from Canada to the southwest, and west to the Pacific ocean. Another species, *Skwala curvata*, shows up as well in the Pacific Northwest. These species are called brown willow flies for a good reason; the adults typically hatch in spring before the willows have leafed out, and they are roughly the color of brown willow stems. Depending on elevation and location this means sometime from early to mid-March to late April.

Skwala stoneflies are smaller than the next wave of western stonefly hatches, the salmonflies and golden stones, but considerably larger than the small dark winter stoneflies that for some reason like to emerge during the cold months of January and

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February. Though males and females differ slightly in size (males are smaller), a size 10, 3XL, hook will match most adult *Skwala*.

Fishing a size 10 dirty yellow stonefly nymph through riffles and deep pockets is worthwhile in the early spring before adult emergence. The beauty of the *Skwala* hatch, however, is that trout readily take the adults - this is surface fishing with nice large dry flies.



Above: Skwala nymphs have long tails and prominent antennae (left), and can be easily confused with golden stonefly nymphs. To tell them apart look for bushy gills at the base of the legs - Skwala nymphs lack them, golden stones have them. A Brook's stone nymph pattern tied in dirty yellow does a good job of imitating a Skwala nymph.



A bouldery run like this is excellent habitat for Skwala nymphs, as well as many other stonefly species and other aquatic insects. Fishing a Skwala nymph pattern along the bottom works well early in the spring.

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One interesting characteristic of adult *Skwala* is that they don't like to fly. In fact male *Skwala* often have short non-functional wings and can't fly. Females have full length wings and can fly, but seem to resist the temptation to take to the air. As a result the adults stay hidden on streamside grass and shrubs, including willows, and can thus be hard to see. For this reason there are usually many more adults out along a stream than it appears. After mating on streamside foliage, the females run out onto the water's surface to lay their eggs.



Adult male (left) with its short non-functional wings and the fully-winged female (right).

Because adults stay close to shore and don't readily fly out over the water, the best place to fish your dry fly is close to the banks. Look for areas with thick streamside vegetation or grassy banks, places adults would like to hang out. Cast up close to the bank and then twitch your flies out away from shore. Carefully cover any place that looks like a



Drift dry flies along heavily vegetated banks where adults stay well hidden. Here Mr. Hughes plays a nice trout caught just inches out from the bank of willows.

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nice spot for a trout to hold; eddies, around logs, undercut banks, overhanging vegetation etc. It won't be hard to know when to set the hook, hungry spring trout generally take these adults with gusto.

A brown Stimulator (size 10, 3XL) makes a simple but effective imitation of adult Skwala.



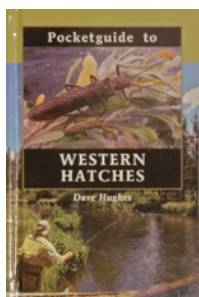
There are many other insects that find spring the perfect time to hatch. In lakes the *Callibaetis* mayfly hatch is hard to beat. And the early spring chironomid hatches in lakes produce some of the best lake fishing of the year. Eastern and Midwestern waters also see a variety of early mayfly hatches like the slate-winged mahogany dun (*Paraleptophlebia*) and Quill Gordon (*Epeorus pleuralis*) to name just a couple. Just like the dazzling array of flowers that come one after another in the spring, the insect life in streams and lakes responds to the warming sun of spring with the same enthusiasm. Thank goodness for April and May!



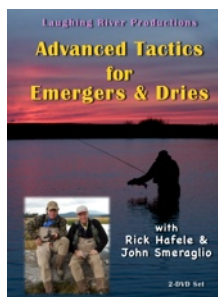
May this spring find you with a fat trout in your hands! ENJOY

News from Dave, Rick, & Skip!

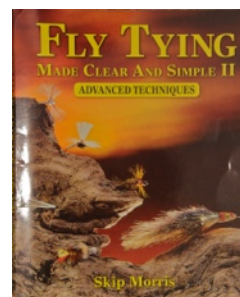
RECENT BOOK & DVD RELEASES



Dave's newest book, *Pocketguide to Western Hatches*, just out September 2011, is now available.--\$21.95--Stackpole Books, 2011



Rick's newest instructional DVD (2-disc set) with John Smeraglio titled, *Advanced Tactics for Emergers & Dries*, is now available. Order it online at www.laughingrivers.com or get at your local fly shop. \$29.95 - Laughing River Productions, 2011



Skip's latest book, *Fly Tying Made Clear and Simple II, Advanced Techniques*, offers thorough instructions for tying many great patterns for fussy trout. Frank Amato Pub, 2009

To learn more about Dave, Skip, and Rick's latest publications, where they are speaking, or to book them for your own program , go to their personal websites at:

Skip Morris: <http://www.skip-morris-fly-tying.com/>

Rick Hafele: <http://rickhafele.com>

Dave Hughes: <http://dave-hughes-fly-fishing.com/>